



ELECTICIS

Peril or Promise in Adventist Philosophy Classes?

Over the years, eclecticism has been both hero and villain. A simple definition will provide some clue as to why this is so. One online dictionary defines *eclecticism* as “selecting or employing individual elements from a variety of sources, systems, or styles.”¹ Depending on how the idea is interpreted, the concept of eclecticism can be seen as everything from a pragmatic, common-sense approach that includes seeing the good in every situation and combining good ideas from various locations, to an ill-thought-out collection of concepts without a defining purpose.² This negative view of eclecticism depicts it as the product of a lack of philosophical rigor, and that if one tackled his or her investigation in a more academic manner, the conclusion would be more uni-

formly systematic, rather than drawn from multiple sources, making eclecticism unnecessary.

During my own doctoral program, I struggled with these concerns,³ which I labeled “ambiguity,” but I eventually realized that clearer language and better thinking would not solve this dilemma: Each theory I studied presented some things that were good, as well as some things that were undesirable. Becoming more comfortable with this ambiguity, I began to see it “as a sort of primordial soup out of which can spring rich new thinking and deeper understanding both of myself and of the world I live in.”⁴ This sort of constant seeking for the good and the useful in every theory and trying to find ways to combine these ideas into larger theories is more satisfying than sim-

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ply following someone else's path without understanding why or automatically accepting as a package things that might not need to be lumped together. There are those, however, who feel that Christianity should provide a complete philosophical package in which everything fits together and merges into a unified plan to which everyone ought to subscribe.⁵

Eclecticism and Adventism

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was founded in the modern era, with very modernist doctrines. For Adventists, truth is frequently spelled with a capital T, revelation is an acceptable form of authority, and most morality is not relative. Ellen White, as God's messenger, helped develop biblically sound doctrinal and philosophical foundations for the Adventist Church that make a good deal of logical sense. These beliefs are so sound, in fact, that Adventist philosophy teaching has frequently been reduced to the simple reproduction of already accepted and digested truths, rather than searching for truth and wrestling with contradictory ideas.

The more the world embraces the mixing of Eastern and Western philosophy, combining pagan and Christian ideas, the more some individuals retreat into the "safe" territory of received truth that allows for no adaptation, growth, or creativity. But truth that does not continue to grow and adapt may find itself irrelevant to a new generation of thinkers. Truth is not a cut flower that is handed down from parents to children, or teachers to students, but rather a seed that must be planted, watered, and tended so that it will grow in the hearts of the next generation and bear fruit. And as that seed grows, it may look different from the parents from which it sprang. We cannot expect it to be otherwise. This is not a case of diluting the truth, and certainly not of revising views about revealed Truth, but merely the natural adaptation of a living thing as God's Spirit interacts with different kinds of believers over time.

Many Adventists, however, take the idea of the unity and immutability of *Adventist philosophy* very seriously. They believe it is a body of knowledge that is learned and handed down to our children verbatim. They regard it as complete in itself, without need of either being mixed with other forms of philosophy or even being compared to them.

I meet doctoral students in every class I teach who feel that the Adventist philosophy is so complete and all-encompassing that they should not risk studying any other sort of information about philosophy, lest their thinking be contaminated.

They thus limit their reading to only Adventist authors, and consider Ellen White's educational philosophy as the end of any discussion. They reason that there should be nothing to talk about anyway, since Adventists all share the same philosophical base.

But when asked whether all Adventists must be idealists or pragmatists, modernists or reconstructionists, or even if they themselves subscribe to a single philosophical perspective, most of my students will hesitantly admit that there are differences among church members, but this still seems dangerous or wrong to them. And for some, to label these differences as eclecticism is anathema. So the differences are usually either denied, covered up, or downplayed in an effort to make the body of Christ uniform in every way possible.⁶

The Need to Learn to Filter

Christian schools agree on and share a set of philosophical beliefs in a way that secular institutions do not.⁷ As two Christian educators have put it, "Within the context of Christian schools, the moral differences and attitudes among the staff are less blurred and more universal."⁸ Of course, given their shared biblical foundation, this is not surprising. And whatever is built on this foundation must be tested using the Bible as a filter, and keeping only the parts that apply. George Knight explains the process in this way: "for the Christian, the Bible is the foremost source of knowledge and the most essential epistemological authority. All other sources of knowledge must be tested and verified in the light of Scripture."⁹

Unfortunately, perhaps because of this tendency toward shared beliefs, Christian schools are not always adept at teaching their students how to deal with contradictory ideas. Nor do they necessarily develop a process for using the Bible as an instrument for testing new concepts. Indeed, the Bible itself teaches us that Christians do not have a monopoly on God's truth, and that we need to learn to filter things. God told Ezekiel: "teach my people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean" (Ezekiel 44:23, NIV).¹⁰

In her article "The Bible and Psychology,"¹¹ which discussed the preparation of Christian psychologists, Donna Habenicht provided some advice that parallels the concerns I have raised here about the field of philosophy. Habenicht used a model developed by Jones and Butman in 1991 to illustrate the basic concepts such a model would contain. This may be part of the

answer to questions about teaching philosophy in an Adventist context. We need to provide students with opportunities to build their own models and evaluate and integrate secular ideas, while always “basing their work on the Biblical model.”¹²

The Interplay Between a Biblical Worldview, Adventist Philosophy, and Traditional Philosophies: A Proposed Model

A list of shared beliefs and values is a good starting point for helping students build their own understandings, which will help them filter new information. Rather than listing the specific elements required in a Christian worldview,¹³ however, this article focuses on presenting and discussing a model that I have developed in my philosophy classes. This model attempts to bridge the gap between secular and Christian philosophy by showing the relationships between a biblical worldview, Adventist philosophy, and traditional philosophies as typically presented in secular settings. An approximation of this relationship is shown in Figure 1 (note that the drawing cannot be completely accurate because of several complexities, which are not possible to show in a two-dimensional drawing).

This model is proposed as a basis from which students can develop their own dynamic filter system, which will be much more useful than a static list. The major features on which this understanding is based are as follows:

1. As Christians, the biblical foundation is the primary basis for our philosophy, no matter what biases we hold.

2. There are elements within Adventist philosophy, such as the Adventist health message, that logically extend the biblical perspective.¹⁴ These extensions must be based in biblical truth and in harmony with scriptural principles.

3. Traditional philosophies should be seen as “ideal types, rather than mutually exclusive belief systems.”¹⁵ People use these traditional philosophies more as primary colors from which to paint their personal perspective, rather than as separate categories from which to choose a single viewpoint. The “Traditional Philosophies” section of Figure 1, therefore, is not neatly divided into four categories (or whatever number you prefer), but rather, these lines are blurred, as each individual may subscribe to a mixture of perspectives.

4. For a Christian, these traditional philosophies (even in the case where an individual subscribes to only one) are not entirely pure. An Adventist might have Idealist leanings, for example, but only as far as those tendencies fit within his or her

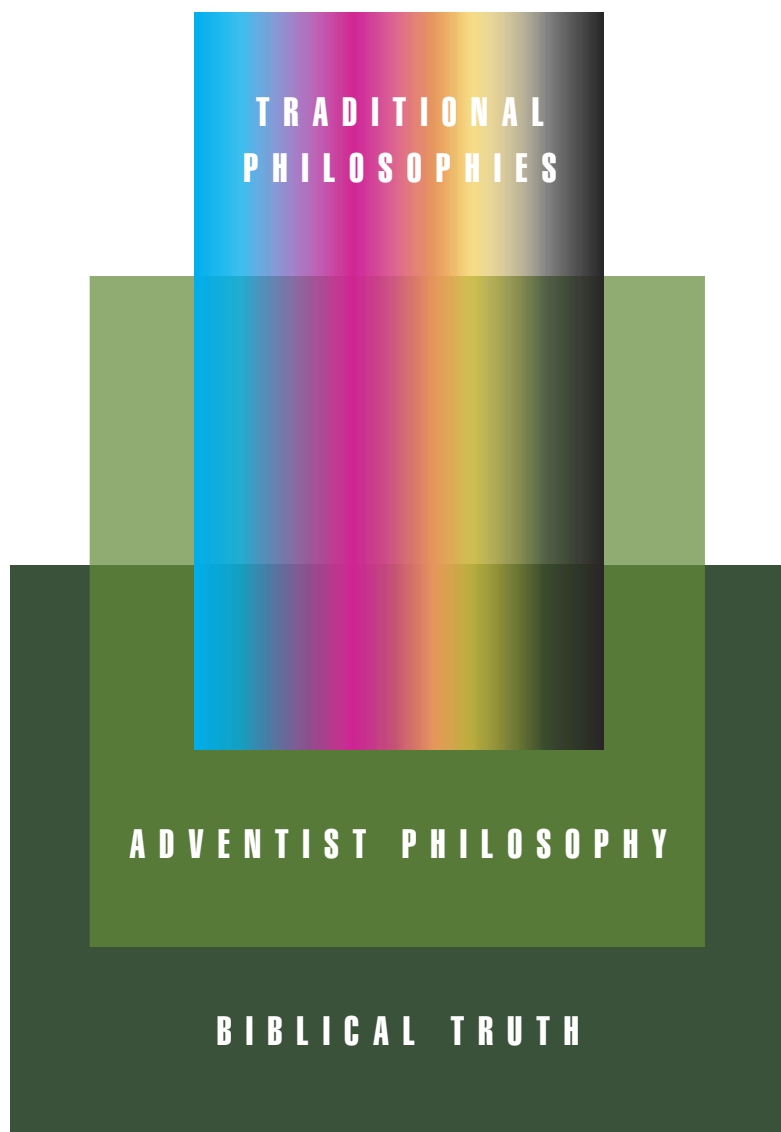


Figure 1. Philosophical Relationships

biblical worldview and understanding of Adventist philosophy. For that reason, Figure 1 shows each of the traditional philosophies as being rooted in the biblical worldview and Adventist philosophy, which, by definition, may disallow some of the potential perspectives of a particular philosophy.

5. One’s philosophical bias, I propose, also affects his or her understanding of both biblical truth and Adventist philosophy. That is, Adventists with reconstructionist leanings, for example, will emphasize biblical truths that fit with their perspective, which will also color their understanding and applications of Adventist philosophy. While the essence of Adventist philosophy and biblical truth will remain the same, the way it is expressed will be unique. In sum, while much of Figure 1 de-

scribes ideas that come from the bottom and filter upward to one's personal preferences, this also works from the top down, where people's personal philosophies affect their interpretation and application of philosophy and biblical principles.

Conclusion

In conclusion, eclecticism can be good or bad, depending heavily on how it is defined and used. Truth can come from many places. "Christ was the originator of all the ancient gems of truth. Through the work of the enemy these truths had been displaced. They had been disconnected from their true position and placed in the framework of error."¹⁶ There is nothing wrong with using this truth, even from non-Christian sources, to build up the kingdom of God. This is not to suggest that very young or immature students should be challenged to seek truth in unlikely places. But mature Christians, especially at the graduate level, need to understand how to select "from the writings of others . . . the gems of truth from the rubbish of error."¹⁷ Skill in doing this is not acquired without practice—or without much prayer.

After graduation, however, Adventist students will face the secular world, so they need to know how to separate truth from error. If we merely teach them a *product*, and fail to teach them a *process* for arriving at truth, we are doing them a disservice because we are not really preparing them to face the world as thinking Christians. At some level, students need to know how Adventist beliefs are similar to those of the world's thinkers, and how they are different. They need to know what they can safely adapt for their purposes, and why. They need to see the dangers of secularism and postmodernism, but they also need to know how they can harness the good ideas of the world and use them to advance the cause of God. Is it possible to address these issues without undermining their faith in God and in Adventist principles?

There is a fine line between the need to protect students from secular ideas, and the parallel need to encourage them to use and adapt secular ideas for sacred purposes. One of the ways we can help students understand these concerns is to share a model like the one presented in this article, which will help them understand how their Christian values must undergird, support, and influence any other philosophical choices they make throughout their lives. If students can clearly see how biblical truth interacts with other truths, and where eclecticism can be acceptable (as well as where it would not be appropriate), this may help them understand their own worldview better, and give them the tools to explain it more coherently to both Christians and non-Christians alike. ✍

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Shawna Vyhmeister, Ph.D., has taught education and research in Adventist colleges and graduate schools on four different continents, and is currently the Director of Research and Extensions for the Adventist University of Africa in Nairobi, Kenya.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See <http://thefreedictionary.com>, s.v. "Eclectic."
2. Concern about the negative effects of eclecticism extends far back into antiquity. The German Lutheran church historian Johann Lorenz Mosheim, in the second part of his book *An Ecclesiastical History* (1842), rejects the approach of those Neo-Platonics in Egypt who went about seeking truth from all sources, both sacred and profane. This early use of the idea of eclecticism was in reality what today we would call *syncretism*.
3. Shawna Vyhmeister, "The Ubiquity of Ambiguity: A Christian Researcher's Quest for Black and White in a Very Gray World," *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 5:1 (Autumn 1996):89-96.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
5. Adventist scholars have proposed developing a "Christian" philosophy that stands apart from the traditional approaches. See for instance, Paul Brantley, "An Adventist Learning Theory? A Case for a Christocentric Epistemology Based Upon Imago Dei." Paper presented at the First International Conference on the Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education, April 8, 2001: <http://circle.adventist.org/download/ImagoDei.pdf>.
6. It was not always so. When the early Adventist Church was busy establishing its ground rules, the church leaders borrowed ideas, nomenclature, and structures. See Andrew G. Mustard, "Seventh-day Adventist Polity: Its Historical Development," last modified May 27, 2007: <http://biblicalresearch.gc.adventist.org/documents/Ecclesiology/AMustard-SDA%20polity.pdf>.
7. Alan Peshkin, *God's Choice: The Total World of a Fundamentalist Christian School* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 262.
8. Dale Linton and Lynn Merklin, *Christian Education: An Educational Alternative for a More Equitable Society* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2008), p. 19.
9. George R. Knight, *Philosophy and Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2006), p. 168.
10. Scripture quotations credited to NIV are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.
11. Donna Habenicht, "The Bible and Psychology." Paper presented at the Symposium on the Bible and Adventist Scholarship, Juan Dolio, Dominican Republic, March 19-26, 2000: http://fae.adventist.org/essays/26Bcc_305-359.htm.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
13. George W. Reid, "Nature, the Biblical Worldview, and Postmodernism": <http://biblicalresearch.gc.adventist.org/documents/nature.htm>. Accessed May 24, 2012.
14. See Knight, *Philosophy and Education*, op. cit.
15. Michael S. Schiro, *Curriculum Theory: Conflicting Visions and Enduring Concerns* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2007), p. 216.
16. Ellen G. White, *Christ Triumphant* (Silver Spring, Md.: The Ellen G. White Estate, 1999), p. 225.
17. Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1998), p. 111.